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ABSTRACT

This booklet describes "Samenspel Op Maat," an initiative started 10 years ago as a small-scale experiment to meet the growing need for day care for migrant children in Rotterdam. There are now hundreds of Samenspel groups in the Netherlands consisting of play afternoons for small groups of mothers and young children, usually under the guidance of professionals who come from the same community. The program does not target only children from ethnic and cultural minorities but focuses more generally on children in disadvantaged situations. The booklet describes the program's history, efforts, and successes, and includes comments on the program from participants and others involved with policy or programs for young children in the region. (EV)

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10 years of samenspel

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flashback to the future

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Samenspel

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Ten years of Samenspel: from small-scale project to national programme

1988 The project proposal for the development and introduction of *Samenspel* is presented to the Bernard van Leer Foundation by the Rotterdam Educational Priority Areas of West and Bloemhof/Hillesluis.

1989 The *Samenspel* project starts with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.
In September -- the official starting date of *Samenspel* -- the Stichting *Samenspel* Rotterdam is established to carry out the first phase of the project.

1990 The first *Samenspel* playgroup leaders are appointed and the first mothers and children are recruited: the first *Samenspel* groups are held at six locations.

1991 The *Samenspel* project is continued under the wing of Stichting De Meeuw, a Rotterdam organisation that is established in the same year to combat disadvantage. The Stichting *Samenspel* Rotterdam is discontinued.

1992 The second phase (which runs through 1996) starts, again with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The purpose of this phase is to lay down the principles and methodology of *Samenspel*, and to implement *Samenspel* within Rotterdam. The methodology is established and disseminated in Rotterdam and beyond. At this point in time, eleven organisations are implementing the *Samenspel* approach.

1993 The *Samenspel* Handboek (*Samenspel* Play Afternoons Manual), describing the principles and methodology of *Samenspel*, is presented during a festive *Samenspel* day attended by more than 200 children and their mothers. The *Samenspel* groups increase in number thanks to the establishment of 'Operatie Speelgoed' ('speelgoed' is Dutch for toys, while 'speel goed' is to play well), which gives a positive qualitative and quantitative impulse to pre-school and early primary school activities in Rotterdam.

1994 The *Samenspel* Praktijkboek (Practical *Samenspel* Manual) for playgroup leaders fulfils a growing need. It describes a large number of activities for stimulating child development that can be carried out with mothers and children. The launch of the book is combined with a big *Samenspel* music festival with and for the *Samenspel* mothers and children. Outside Rotterdam the interest in the *Samenspel* approach and materials is also growing.

1995 Two students at the University of Amsterdam research mothers' experiences of *Samenspel*. This results in the publication 'Mothers speaking'. The first copy is presented to the then State Secretary of Education, Mrs. Netelenbos, at an exuberant *Samenspel* swimming party for *Samenspel* mothers and toddlers. At a six day national *'Samenspel boat conference'* on practice, more than 200 participants from the Netherlands and Belgium discuss the many varied applications of the *Samenspel* approach. During the conference a great need is identified for the *Samenspel* team to provide guidance, support and training. The conference also shows the growing recognition for the *Samenspel* approach from within local authorities and national organisations.

Samenspel Op Maat

10 years

Samen~spel
Op Maat

Foreword

Samenspel Op Maat, which started with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, is an appreciated and impressive partner for us. The basic principle of Samenspel is simple. Play afternoons are organised for small groups of mothers and young children, usually under the guidance of professionals, most of whom come from the same community. The programme doesn't just target children from ethnic and cultural minorities: it focuses more generally on children in disadvantaged situations.

The project was set up ten years ago as a small-scale experiment to meet the growing need for daycare facilities for migrant children. Now there are hundreds of Samenspel groups, not only in Rotterdam: in the Netherlands and beyond an increasing number of groups work with the Samenspel approach.

Samenspel Op Maat has great potential. Its threshold is low, which helps to stimulate the actual participation of many children and their parents, while its approach fosters the enthusiasm of parents and their children to work at their own development. The basic principle is not only simple, it is also dynamic and flexible and - above all - very effective.

It is not surprising then that Samenspel Op Maat has gained increasing recognition: in The Hague, for instance, where the local authorities have been inspired by an activity like 'Samentaal' (a variation based on the Samenspel programme, but with an emphasis on linguistic development), and in Samenspel's inclusion in the policy of the Minister for Urban Policy and the Integration of Ethnic Minorities. Samenspel is in close alignment with the policy of the Dutch Government as set down in the Social Welfare Statement 1999-2002. Particularly the strategic aim of 'Promotion of participation and accessibility' that is mentioned in this Statement, constitutes exactly that which Samenspel Op Maat stands for: lowering the thresholds of, for instance, regular daycare facilities for children and education for grown ups.

Samenspel Op Maat has a fantastic past to look back on. More important, it has a phenomenal potential in the future to contribute effectively to the development of children and their parents. I hope and expect that Governmental and private initiatives will regard the continuation and further development of Samenspel Op Maat as a challenge; one that they understand is in their own self interest to rise to.

Rien van Gendt
Executive Director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation

Parents don't enjoy being patronised when it comes to the education of their children. According to Samenspel Op Maat, that shouldn't happen because no 'expert' knows a child better than mother or father does. Samenspel Op Maat's success can therefore probably be explained by the fact that its playgroup leaders assist parents as equals in the education of their offspring. What started off ten years ago with Samenspel play afternoons in the Rotterdam neighbourhoods Bloemhof/Hillesluis, Spangen and Delfshaven, has developed into an approach that is widely circulated and that attracts growing interest, not only in the Netherlands, but also abroad.

Mothers of day one

Moroccan mother **Malika** was one of the first to register her child for a Samenspel play afternoon, and four of her five children have participated in Samenspel. Malika tells us: "It seemed a good idea to me that my child should learn to play with other children. But, frankly, that wasn't the only reason I went. As a mother I enjoy talking to other mothers about the things that happen to you in your life, and giving each other some support. Because I am at home all day, just doing the housekeeping. Talking can be quite a relief: you can unload a little on to each other. For instance, someone may have problems with her parents in law, or with the upbringing of her child, and often one of the leaders or mothers will know a solution." Once he is two, Malika will also bring her fifth child to the weekly Samenspel play afternoons.

The Samenspel play afternoons were started as a result of the project plan that was formulated in 1988: 'Samenspel - project for the development of an intercultural approach and for enabling playgroups in Rotterdam to reach Turkish and Moroccan children'. The most important principle was that "*...stimulation of children has the greatest impact if it starts early*". **Wim Lanser** of the Centrum Educatieve Dienstverlening (Education Services Centre) in Rotterdam, was project leader for the Education Priority Policy in Bloemhof/Hillesluis at the time. He remembers: "In daily practice at school it became clear that children mastered neither their own language nor Dutch". For a short time Lanser was also Chairman of the Board of the Stichting Samenspel Rotterdam. "Children of non Dutch origine lacked certain skills at preschool, because their homes and neighbourhoods didn't offer them enough stimulation to learn through 'experience'.
The walk-in afternoons for mothers and children that were organised by playgroup work in Gorinchem, formed the basis for Samenspel. But we took it a step further: play afternoons for mothers and children together, guided by both a playgroup leader who speaks the mothers' language and a Dutch speaking playgroup leader."
According to Lanser, this way of working offered children the possibility of acquiring playing and learning experience in a safe environment; making an early start to developing linguistic skills in their own language and in Dutch; and giving mothers an easy means of developing contacts with other mothers and taking part in neighbourhood activities.
The Samenspel approach, as the method was called, was unique and hadn't been applied anywhere else. The fact that both the mother tongue and Dutch were being spoken drew the mass interest of parents. Lanser believes that Samenspel is successful because it's the communal, rather than the individual's interest that has always been the primary aim.

"It's miraculous that a small project has developed into a nation wide organisation, in which interest is still growing, even beyond the nation's borders."

Development of Samenspel

The Samenspel project started in 1989; and the Stichting Samenspel Rotterdam was set up especially to run it, with financial support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The first three years were spent in establishing an infrastructure and developing a methodology for Samenspel; gaining experience in intercultural work; recruiting mothers, children and migrant playgroup leaders; and organising play afternoons for mothers and children together.

At the end of 1991, the Stichting Samenspel Rotterdam was wound up and Stichting De Meeuw took charge of the project until 1997. After the first phase, in 1992, the associated social welfare organisations were asked whether they were interested in taking over responsibility for Samenspel. From that moment on they took on the employment of playgroup leaders and the responsibility for the continuation of the Samenspel play afternoons.

From 1992 through 1996, the emphasis was on determining and further developing the methodology, and on disseminating it in Rotterdam and the rest of the country. Starting in 1997, as well as further implementation in the region, objectives expanded to include national and European promotion of the methodology; and it was to meet those aims that the Stichting Samenspel Op Maat was set up.

Samenspel's three main aims haven't changed much since 1990: to stimulate the development of young children to help improve their chances in primary education; to stimulate families to take their children to playgroups; and to offer educational support to parents.

Over the years Samenspel Op Maat has extended these aims to include:

- training and skills enhancement of playgroup leaders by developing and offering courses, and developing a teaching method for Samenspel playgroup leaders and introducing it into educational institutes;
- developing, introducing and supporting the 'Ambassador-approach': local practice-based networks in which the expertise and qualities of Samenspel playgroup leaders are strengthened and put to best use;
- giving information and advice to organisations and (local) authorities about the Samenspel approach;
- strengthening and deepening the international network in order to promote the Samenspel approach; and collaborating with like-minded organisations abroad;
- stimulating qualitative research into the outreach and into the effect of the Samenspel methodology; research that can contribute to the further development of the content and dissemination of the programme.

At this point in time there are more than two hundred Samenspel groups active in the whole of the Netherlands, of which over fifty are in Rotterdam.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a privately owned foundation that aims to give children from 0 to 7 years in disadvantaged situations better chances in life. The Bernard van Leer Foundation has been financing Samenspel since its beginnings.

Familiar surroundings

The principle behind Samenspel is simple.
Give mothers a familiar environment in which they can discuss educational affairs in their own language with playgroup leaders and other mothers; where they learn to play with their children, read to them and do movement games. For many women Samenspel is a home from home, where they can be themselves, and where their expertise as parents is the guiding principle. Another important reason for parents to join the Samenspel playgroups is that their children learn Dutch at the same time.

Ten years ago the Turkish mothers **Tuncer, Döndü, Taliye and Holice,** and the Moroccan mothers **Malika** and **Fatiha,** with their children, came together for the first time in the 'Stereo' community centre in the Rotterdam neighbourhood of Hillesluis. These women live near to each other; Malika and Fatiha even live in the same street.
The community centre is on a square with a basketball court where children can also play football and skate. Over the years, many streets in Hillesluis have been given a facelift: blocks of old houses have been pulled down to make space for new ones; and here and there green playing fields have been fitted in, with a see-saw for the youngest children and a rope climbing frame for the older ones.

"*Children don't just grow up*" say the mothers now. At Samenspel they discovered that it is good to teach children all sorts of things through play.
"In Turkish child rearing practice it isn't usual to prepare your children for school. The house has to be clean, really clean. Cleaning and cooking keep you intensively busy each day. You don't easily play with or read to your child: there simply isn't time.
Now I know it is good to prepare your children for school at an early age. Because of Samenspel our children found primary school a lot less scary, since it was 'normal' for them to go to school and play with other children."

Door-to-door recruitment

The younger children play in a corner of the space that Samenspel leaders use to sit aside with the mothers. Malika and Fatiha took off their head scarves when they came in. Tuncer is the only mother present who doesn't wear a head scarf in the first place. She is also the only Turkish mother present who speaks reasonable Dutch. Fatiha came to Holland when she was 16 and speaks good Dutch. Malika has been in Holland since she was four and her Rotterdam accent is clearly recognisable.
In a torrent of words she tells her story, confidently and without beating about the bush.
"A playgroup leader showed me a leaflet. At first I was the only Moroccan women to respond to it. Berber women, in particular, are not allowed by their husbands to take part in activities outside the house. We went looking for more women with playgroup leader Mala Balgobind."

Multilingual leaflets were distributed door-to-door in Hillesluis. In other neighbourhoods, like Spangen and Delfshaven, the playgroup leaders went along the houses to tell mothers about Samenspel. They also visited health centres and got the local media to give the project coverage. They sought collaboration with the primary schools as well. The recruitment of Turkish women took considerably less effort than recruiting Moroccans. Tuncer: "Turkish women come of their own accord, if it appeals to them."

Samenspel on the way

Minister for Urban Policy and the Integration of Ethnic Minorities, R.H.L.M. van Boxtel

"Children must get to know the world and the world isn't always nice. The older children get, the more they discover that the street, the playground and the school are very demanding and sometimes threatening. That's why they need parents, or people who want to be like parents to them, to whom they can turn for safety and protection; for the certainty that there is a place where they will always be sheltered, always welcome.

That is not a simple task for parents or carers. It's hard enough for parents who know the environment well, understand the school, and can give their children the support they need. It's much harder still if parents don't know the society, cannot understand the lessons, or have to count every penny.

Parents from ethnic minorities are often in a vulnerable position when it comes to the education of their children. They see their children growing up in a situation that differs from the one they themselves grew up in. They have to learn to deal with that, but that is often very difficult, especially since, for example, their limited knowledge of the Dutch language may make it difficult for them to orientate themselves in Dutch society. Sometimes these worlds are so far apart that parents are not able to give the support their children need in order to get through school successfully. Social isolation can make it difficult for them to ask for help with this.

Research has shown that young children from ethnic minorities begin their school careers with a disadvantage in their linguistic and cognitive development. Despite efforts during primary school, this disadvantage often stays with them. Yet every child in our country is entitled to our best efforts.

This is why it is important that preschool initiatives such as Samenspel continue to exist. Here parents are made to draw on their ability to give their children the support they need to start their school career well prepared."

From chaos to structure

On her first day at work, ten years ago, playgroup leader **Mala Balgobind** noticed how 'white' the community centre in Hillesluis was. Mala and her Moroccan colleague **Jamila** were the only two people of non-Dutch origin. "Those were turbulent days" recalls Mala. "Policy focused on combating disadvantage, migrant families were stimulated to make use of education and welfare facilities, Turkish mothers applied en masse for Samenspel play afternoons, and Dutch playgroup leaders felt overcome by everything that was coming at them full speed."

During those first years, Mala and the other playgroup leaders did everything themselves. Everything was new. Initially they didn't get much support from the community centre, and the programme itself was still in its development stage. Mala and her colleagues recruited mothers, solved social problems, accompanied mothers to their docters, helped them find language lessons, and set up Samenspel play afternoons. "I believe that much has improved during those ten years", says Mala.

"There is an organisation, a good programme and a structure. Everything used to be much more haphazard."

Samenspel playgroup leaders do a lot: anything from organising Samenspel play afternoons or information afternoons about primary schools, through collaborating with other organisations in the neighbourhood.

For outsiders a Samenspel play afternoon in the 'Stereo' community centre may seem chaotic and busy. "I have cured myself of working according to strict rules", says Mala. "Because it doesn't fit this group. Being together with mothers and children is more important to me than having a structured afternoon. There's two of us, so one can withdraw with the mothers after the first half hour together, while the other concentrates on the children. It doesn't always happen just like that, because mothers often require a lot of attention. It's understandable, really. Many mothers have difficulty with Dutch customs. Because of that they are more likely to need to talk to women in a comparable situation, than to listen to our stories about why it is important to play together."

The Samenspel approach is aimed at enabling playgroup leaders to attune their ways of working to the target group as much as possible. Because of that, no two Samenspel groups are the same. The flexibility of the approach enables playgroup leaders to integrate social factors into their work.

Mothers regularly confide in Mala and sometimes her opinions clash with their norms and values. But when she looks at what the children get out of Samenspel, it still outweighs the effort it sometimes takes to tolerate and accept certain remarks.
"Eventually mothers see that playing can be a way of learning. Appreciation for Samenspel among playgroup leaders and primary school teachers is growing too. The preschool thing has become an issue for the whole neighbourhood. We know where almost all children between two and four in the neighbourhood are and which facilities they use. I estimate that we reach 80 percent of them. Because of Samenspel there are now many more migrant playgroup leaders.

The Samenspel Op Maat team has held us up as an example from the start and has stimulated other women tremendously to follow courses. Because of that, many Turkish and Moroccan women now have work in the preschool sector. I find that very worthwhile."

The division of work between the Dutch and the migrant playgroup leader is different in each Samenspel group. In some groups the migrant leader focuses more on the mothers, while the Dutch one plays with and observes the children.

Working interculturally

In many ways, Samenspel playgroup leaders **Mala, Sukran, Jamila, Sefa, Nebahat** and **Samiye** were pioneers. The intercultural work, in particular, was much more difficult than anticipated beforehand, remembers **Aysu Köksal**. Aysu was coordinator of the Samenspel project, with Rob van der Wal, from 1989 through 1991. "Samenspel was the first 'centre-based' project in Rotterdam. The principle was new: working together with parents and young children outside the home. Migrant parents weren't acquainted either with preschool activities or with the value of such activities for the language development of their children. And they were anxious about sending their children to the playgroup. In Turkey, for example, it is quite common to keep children at home until they reach school age. I have believed in Samenspel

There's no easy solution to social problems

Prof. dr. Jo Hermanns works in Co Act consult, consultancy for child welfare and child policy and is part-time Professor in Pedagogy at the University of Amsterdam.

"No matter how complicated some social problems are, our society keeps asking for easy solutions that take effect quickly. Is the problem that disadvantaged children don't do well at school? Then make sure that parents offer them the correct intellectual support before they go to school. Are behaviour problems most common in families that suffer socially? Well, give those parents a course on child rearing. If necessary just create a law that forces them to take the course. Are young people causing trouble in the streets? Impose a curfew and punish the parents of those children who don't adhere to the curfew. Three things are striking in these types of modern simple solutions. First of all, parents usually get the blame. Second, they don't take into account the background that children have and the original causes of the problems. And third, the envisaged solutions turn out not to work.

At Samenspel, fortunately, things are done very differently. There they take into account the complicated and laborious context within which some families have to bring up their children. They immerse themselves in the problems as parents encounter them, and listen to how the 'target group' feels about things. And they have a lot of patience. Complicated social problems can't be solved in six weeks and often not even in ten years. Perhaps targets should be extremely modest and be formulated as 'to make a difference'. And in the lives of many children and parents, Samenspel has made that difference."

from the start. When I look at how it has developed and how its method is being picked up by other cities, it proves we are right. As a scientist I hope that one day research will be done into the relationship between taking part in Samenspel and a child's achievements at school. That would really round it off for me."

In the three years that Köksal was coordinator of Samenspel, she saw the number of children grow slowly to 300 and saw a waiting list develop. Finding migrant playgroup leaders wasn't easy in the beginning. There were Dutch playgroup leaders, but they weren't familiar with the Turkish or Moroccan target groups. In those first years, many of the women learned to become playgroup leaders through practical experience. For Köksal these migrant playgroup leaders fulfilled both a bridging and an exemplary role: to parents, children, the associated welfare organisations, and the Dutch playgroup leaders.

Samenspel organised a few meetings at which playgroup leaders from different cultures, each with their own views on education, could discuss their own backgrounds together. "It wasn't just the mothers who had their own ideas; the playgroup leaders differed too. And anyway, even if you are from the same country, in the end it is education, circumstances and character that determine the outlook of a human being. Dutch mothers, for example, find independence an important characteristic in children, while Turkish mothers value honesty. In the eyes of the Dutch playgroup leaders, their migrant colleagues didn't show enough initiative; whereas they were actually avoiding showing initiative for fear of making mistakes."

Marion Schachtschabel, Samenspel playgroup leader in a Rotterdam neighbourhood, also remembers the

"Through the ambassadors I discovered that rules can differ strongly among Samenspel groups. That's how I noticed that the rules in our group are actually too strict; I am going to change that."

Solving the puzzle together

"What is it that makes Samenspel successful while other comparable initiatives are less so? One of the most important reasons", according to educationalist Elly Singer, "is Samenspel's easy accessibility." Her viewpoint is that parents can identify with Samenspel. "Targets are not abstract. Playgroup leaders respond very directly to essential questions that parents ask. Not as experts, but as equals. They stay close to the parents. I call that 'thinking together'. Literally exchanging thoughts about the children and coming to solutions in that way. Parents bring in their experience and playgroup leaders bring in their professional expertise. By discussing everything together, a communal way of thinking is born naturally."

Singer says that this is because "theoretical manuals and educational courses don't have any direct answers to questions that both parents and playgroup leaders encounter in daily practice." She gives an example from her own environment. "Birthday parties made the little boy next door very aggressive. With the neighbours, I sought for possible reasons. His father told me that last time the boy put on his pyjamas even before the visitors came. Apparently this was because he couldn't cope with all the impressions that assaulted him at birthday parties, and he had simply come up with his own solution: to go to bed. By talking about it we came to see that he might enjoy it much more if he could celebrate his birthday without all the grownups - in his own room with the other children, for example. Or grandfather should perhaps take him for a walk in-between, to enable him to calm down for a while. To me, that process of 'thinking together' is very clear in Samenspel. Parents and playgroup leaders solve the puzzle together, even if the results cannot be measured or predicted. Samenspel is a loving climate and to grow up in it is a nice bonus for any child."

early days very well. "When I look back at the beginnings of Samenspel, what strikes me most is how very new it was to work with a colleague of non Dutch origin. I had never done that before. You have to talk a lot together before you can work well together. You need to understand each other's position in life. Once you know each other better, you also understand why certain things are done in certain ways. I think that, in general, these matters are taken too lightly: it is important to talk about each other's differences. Not everything is a matter of fact for everybody, and organisations tend to steamroll over that."

The Samenspel playgroup leader: one of a kind

The 'Samenspel playgroup leader' profession is unique. All the playgroup leaders agree about that. It's because they have two target groups at the same time: mothers and children. A specific approach is developed for each, matching the level and environment of the target groups.

There isn't yet a separate training for Samenspel playgroup leaders. There is very little attention within regular training possibilities paid to the concept of working with parents and children at the same time. Often the thought still seems to be that there is nothing to leading a Samenspel group and that it can be compared to running any other playgroup. Or, in the words of one of the Samenspel playgroup leaders: "Sometimes we lack recognition and appreciation for our profession".

"It isn't just about explaining and listening", says **Monica Harms**, coordinator of preschool activities at the Stichting Welzijn Feijenoord (agency for social welfare in the Feijenoord area), which heads the community centres 'Stereo' and 'Ravennest'. "Discussing things

with parents, making presentations, getting people enthusiastic and motivated, setting limits and keeping an overview: these all weigh equally." According to Monica Harms, the qualifications expected from Samenspel playgroup leaders are quite a lot higher now than they were ten years ago. That's why she is sorry that insufficient attention is paid within existing training facilities to the concept of working with parents and children at the same time. Although this has ceased to be the case a long time ago, courses are still based on the principle that parents visit the children's centre to bring or pick up their child, to take part in specific activities, or to visit a parents' evening. Parents have become more outspoken and want to hear the playgroup leader's views and opinions. "That interaction between parents and playgroup leaders should be given a place in new courses", says Monica Harms.

"I hope that the range of courses available to Samenspel playgroup leaders is extended in the future. Samenspel is so unique that so far only Samenspel Op Maat has been able to fulfil this specific need. *The 'Samenspel playgroup leader' profession is still one of a kind.*"

Samenspel and primary school

All sorts of variations to the Samenspel theme have evolved in practice. One of these is SamBa: Samenspel and primary school ('Basisschool' in Dutch). Within SamBa, playgroup leaders, mothers and children meet in small groups within the settings of a primary school.

Children and parents become acquainted with the primary school 'in passing', as it were. SamBa manages to reach certain target groups that don't come to playgroups or to regular Samenspel groups. It is a collaboration between education and welfare; in particular between (the first years of) primary schools and preschool work.

One binding factor is the fact that primary schools play a major role: they supply space and materials, but they also see this form of playgroup work as an important contribution to the implementation of a new policy. Sometimes SamBa is intended as a means to 'reach' children who are too old to go to playgroups and functions as a means of preparation for primary school. In other cases, with younger children, it is clearly a way of introducing them to the concept of a playgroup.

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"As a primary school team we are very happy with SamBa. We see how three year olds and their mothers slowly get used to the primary school and so get a much better start than the children we saw two or more years ago."
***(Stoffel Boot**, Director of primary school 'De Akker')*

In the ten years that the Samenspel playgroup leader profession has existed, the pedagogical aspects of the work have been further developed, but the informal atmosphere has remained unchanged.

Looking back from within practice

Samiye Kaya *has been a Samenspel playgroup leader for nine years now; she works in the Millinx neighbourhood in the South of Rotterdam.* "Initially we had no idea what Samenspel was! Together with a new Dutch colleague, we set it all up ourselves. We had been trained as playgroup leaders and had no experience whatsoever in working with parents and children at the same time. We were partially supported by the Samenspel organisation, but the Samenspel Play Afternoons Manual and the Practical Samenspel Manual didn't exist yet. Everything was new, also for our coordinator. We kept on putting a lot of time into recruitment, preparations, and experimenting. Colleagues didn't know what to make of us: 'Hmmm, Samenspel... what is it anyway, and why is it free?'

And every season again, there was also the uncertainty as to whether Samenspel could continue.
Everything is different now. *You don't have to keep explaining what Samenspel is. In those days we had hardly any colleagues, now there are very many Samenspel playgroup leaders.* Samenspel is well known now, also to the management of our organisation, and has become established. The coordinator knows much more now than at first and can therefore offer better support.
The collaboration with schools is very good now too. Things are much more matter of fact, as is working in a group. Slowly but surely you work out the right activities for parents and children; it is something that has to grow. I used to have to think very hard about everything, and just keep trying things out; now I have developed a greater insight.
I have stopped expecting too much too soon from a group and focus more on what suits it. I think it's important to work step by step, so that everyone can keep up. That way everyone keeps coming."

Marion Schachtschabel *is Samenspel playgroup leader in the Rotterdam neighbourhood of Oude Noorden.*
"In the course of the years, Samenspel has become much more structured. There is much more collaboration with playgroups and schools.
We visit each other, with or without parents and children, and we regularly discuss themes that we can then deal with in more or less the same way.
If you visit a parents' evening at school, you see many mothers who used to be at Samenspel.
We try to pass on to mothers that it is important for their children to go to school.
Apparently it works. *We have achieved a lot so far and we should be proud of that.* We always want more and quicker, but we are actually doing a fantastic job. We don't allow ourselves to recognise that enough."

Marjo Maan *is Samenspel playgroup leader in the Rotterdam neighbourhood of Hoogvliet.*
"Samenspel in Hoogvliet is very different now than it was in the beginning. With my background in social cultural work, for the first four years I was the only playgroup leader who ran a Samenspel group.
Later Samenspel was extended to other playgroups. Now every Samenspel group has a professional playgroup leader and an assistant playgroup leader.
In the beginning we had to be self-supporting but now there is a budget, for example to buy materials.
And nowadays all Samenspel playgroup leaders in Hoogvliet get together every two months to discuss things, so that we stay more or less on a par with each other. We do that during working hours and it is really useful. It is wonderful to have colleagues after having pondered things alone for four years.
I used to have only two hours for a Samenspel group; now I have six. Aside from running the actual group, these are spent on discussion, recruitment and, for example, preparation of theme meetings.
The first few years I always had to explain what I was doing in Samenspel; that is no longer necessary.

The playgroups take Samenspel seriously because they see that we do the preparatory work and offer security to parents and children in the playgroups.
There is also recognition of the fact that working with parents and children at the same time requires very different qualities in a playgroup leader. I feel that the formalised education systems should take greater notice of this type of work. It takes years to pluck the fruits of investing in parents but when that time comes it is very inspiring. It is also important to know that there is someone 'from outside' behind you, who knows what Samenspel is and supports you, like the people in the Samenspel Op Maat ambassador's club. I think you should probably have ten hours a year for that: it gives you good ideas.
In our case this is sometimes possible during

working hours; it depends on the subject. *To be a Samenspel playgroup leader should be officially recognised as a profession! Working with parents and children is so important.* We are the next link after the health centre."

Zeynep Gölgeli, *Samenspel playgroup leader in the Rotterdam neighbourhood of Bloemhof,* feels that the Samenspel playgroup leader profession has changed tremendously in the last couple of years.
"For us Samenspel used to sometimes consist of talking to mothers, knitting and crocheting, and eating snacks that we had brought with us. Those days are long gone. There is structure to our work now; we work to a programme, more like playgroups work. That makes it much heavier. *There is more to it than there used to be.* Sometimes we deal with long and complicated topics. When you discuss dental care, for example, it is no longer sufficient to brush your teeth and hand out pictures to colour in. You have to give it systematic attention, weeks on end, and supply a lot of information. So I make booklets myself, translate into Turkish, do a lot of copying. I get paid for 16 hours of work, but every week I am here at least 20 hours. There is no budget to pay me for more hours; the organisation wants me to do everything in those 16. But it can't be done: it would be at the expense of the quality so I do things in my spare time. *When you recruit people you also have to give a lot of information, because parents with older children think Samenspel is still the way it was: a knitting and talking club. But those days are long gone.*

I would like more publicity for Samenspel, and more recognition. The organisation does show appreciation, but sometimes I get the impression that the extent of what we do it isn't clear. I'm very happy with compliments from the primary school; to hear how well a Samenspel child is doing in the group. And mothers are also always very happy with Samenspel. And that in turn gives me new energy."

Little fish in the sea

Not all children who where there at the beginning can still be traced; many have moved or are now in the first class of secondary education and don't have time anymore after school to reminisce about their days at Samenspel. **Tariq, Tolga** and **Meryem** sacrifice their Wednesday morning; it is autumn half-term holiday. "My mother was very proud of me", recalls Tariq, "when I was the only child in group one who could list almost all the animals. Except the fish, I forgot those. I learned the names of the animals at Samenspel."
Tuncer's twelve year old son Tolga still remembers all the things he did at Samenspel. "We went to the zoo, I learned to ride a bike, and I learned to stay at the table when we were given milk and a cookie." Aside from riding a bike, Tolga learned to cut, colour and draw. "Miss read us 'Dikkie Dik' in Turkish." And he can still sing along to the song 'Visje, Visje in de zee' (little fish in the sea). At home, Meryem (who is now twelve) regularly looks at photos of her Samenspel group. One of her best friends was in the same group. That friend was very frightened of the beard of Sinterklaas, remembered Meryem, because they didn't celebrate Sinterklaas at her house (Sinterklaas and Santa Claus were derived from the same Spanish saint; the Dutch celebrate his birthday on the 5th of December and young Dutch children believe that he brings gifts in the night). "When I went to kindergarten I could already dress and undress myself" says Tolga. "I could do everything, really, because I learned a lot at Samenspel. I learned my first Dutch words there too."
"It's not so scary when your mother stays with you" recalls Meryem. "And you get all her attention."
Meryem can also remember that two ladies came to her house first to read to her. She is now in group eight, but Meryem already knows what she wants to be when she grows up: a stewardess with KLM, on scheduled flights from Istanbul to Amsterdam. That way she can be in both the Netherlands and Turkey.

Mothers speaking

In 1995 a piece of research titled 'Mothers speaking' was carried out by Nanette Kieneker and Judith Maas, under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Jo Hermanns. The results of this research showed that Samenspel inspired mothers of many nationalities (from Turkey, Morocco, the Netherlands Antilles, Guyana, Pakistan and the Netherlands) to change the way they stimulated the development of their children.

Of the total number of mothers interviewed (35), almost half indicated having changed their attitude towards the development of independence in their children. With respect to socio-emotional and linguistic development, more than two thirds of the mothers claimed to have changed their approach after Samenspel. Mothers also noticed changes in the children themselves. One third of the mothers felt that their child had made progress in linguistic development. Three quarters of the mothers indicated that their child had become more socially competent and more independent. For some mothers, Samenspel gave more structure and regularity to their daily lives. A number of mothers explained that through Samenspel they were better able to know what to do and what not to do. Their relationships with their children changed too: contacts were suppler and more positive; they shared more joyful moments together and often things were nicer at home.

**An 'Opzoomerteam' (named after the street where it all started) is a group of people who take initiatives to clean up and improve their neighbourhood; all part of the Rotterdam Opzoomer initiative (which includes annual festivities throughout the city) to keep the city clean and pleasant.*

"Another culture is an enrichment"

According to **Pembe**, mother and Samenspel ambassador, "another culture is an enrichment." Since she came to the Netherlands from Turkey 13 years ago, Pembe has been a voluntary worker. For some years she worked in a daycare centre; now, amongst other things, she leads a Turkish women's group. "People often think that if as a mother you don't have a job, you don't do anything. But of course that needn't be true at all, like in my case." Community centre 'De Graanschuur' in the Rotterdam neighbourhood of Tarwewijk has been decorated. Here and there are some garlands, there are Christmas presents, and a big snowman has been stuck on to the front door. In the community centre the same rules apply to everyone. To make this clear to all visitors, a blow up of article 1 of the constitution has been put on the wall. Pembe is one of the most active mothers in Tarwewijk, a neighbourhood with many social problems. After having spent the morning with her neighbourhood's 'Opzoomerteam'*, she celebrates Christmas with the children and mothers in her own community centre and subsequently manages to make time for this interview. Finally, after dinner, she goes to see the play that was made especially for the community members and in which they play all the roles themselves.

Her two youngest children, a two year old son and a seven year old daughter, are both real 'Samenspel children'. Her oldest daughter, who is now 14 and in the second class of secondary school, only went to Samenspel for a short time. "She only went three times and then went straight on to the playgroup." With her youngest child Pembe goes to three Samenspel groups: one Turkish and two mixed groups.

Children should learn to deal with different cultures as early as possible, according to Pembe.
So that they can get used to each other. "I don't think it's a good idea for my children not to meet their peers from the Netherlands Antilles until they go to primary school. The sooner they get to know other cultures, the more they will consider that normal." Pembe, who is also a Samenspel ambassador, actively recruits for Samenspel among Turkish mothers in her women's group. "I stimulate women to make use of as many facilities as possible and to develop initiatives themselves too. Many women hide behind the excuse that they don't speak adequate Dutch. But that's no reason to do nothing. On the contrary in fact. Then tackle the language problem first by joining a language course."

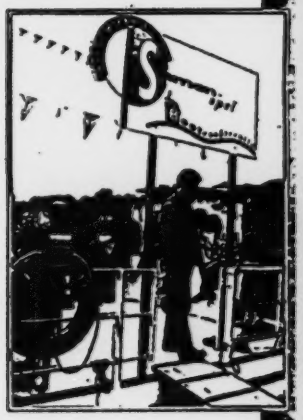
According to Pembe the Turkish women in her group are worried that if they participate fully in Dutch society, they will lose their own culture. "It's a pity that many mothers find it important for their child to go to the Koran lesson, but are slow to see the value of a children's afternoon in the community centre. I tell them 'the more you worry, the more you lose; your child will gain a culture'. I try to make it clear to them that they should see it as an enrichment instead of a threat." Next year, all being well, Pembe will start on the MBO (professional education) Social Cultural Work course. She has the recommendation letter from the social cultural worker of the community centre in her bag. "Who knows", she says, laughing, "next year I may be doing a course."

Every day Pembe sees evidence that her children's attendance at Samenspel and then the playgroup, has bourne fruit. "My seven year old daughter reads at a higher level than is usual for group four pupils. At home my children are never bored and they are good at playing with other children. I always say to the Turkish mothers in my group: 'tell your children what they do wrong, but also what they do right. And give them your attention, even if it's only five minutes!'"

Fun but serious too

The six-day boat trip that was organised in 1995 and that ended at Hotel New York in Rotterdam, is a good example of that. By 1995 a large number of Samenspel groups had been established outside Rotterdam; the experiences of these organisations could inspire Samenspel to develop new initiatives, or to extend existing ones.
On Sunday 11 June 1995 a team of eleven people went aboard the motorised ship 'Ahoy' in Gorinchem. The ship sailed to Heusden, Arnhem, Kampen and Amsterdam and ended its journey at the Mullerpier in Rotterdam. At every jetty participants came aboard to exchange thoughts about subjects that they largely brought forward themselves, with the Samenspel organisation and its funder, the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

No detached theoretical speeches, but enthusiastic stories from daily practice. "But that's typically Samenspel", says **Rita Swinnen**, Programme Specialist at the Bernard van Leer Foundation. She experienced the whole of that boat trip. "Samenspel is fun and you see that reflected in all participants - young or old. A whole bus of Samenspel folk once visited us at the Bernard van Leer Foundation: the children walked through the building confidently and full of curiosity; the entire Foundation staff let experienced mothers tempt them into taking part in play activities; and Samenspel ambassadors spoke with enthusiasm about their responsibilities in carrying forth the Samenspel message. At Samenspel, developmental stimulation and educational support are fun and yet very serious issues. In all sorts of forms and variations, Samenspel is possible in the Netherlands, Germany,



> *"The ambassador's club is almost like family to me. You feel accepted, it keeps you motivated."*

Northern Ireland, Turkey, the Netherlands Antilles and Morocco. In the Netherlands, Samenspel Op Maat is ready to coordinate, to network and to support, especially in collaboration with cities that recognise the value of pre-school activities in educational policy."

Leader from the very first

Sukran Otuk-Bostanci was a Samenspel playgroup leader from the very first, but hasn't worked as one for some years now. Yet she still visits the Samenspel Op Maat ambassador's meetings almost every month. "My parents didn't think it was necessary for me to move on to secondary education after primary school. I learned to speak Dutch better and better because I functioned as an interpreter for my parents; they took me everywhere with them. It just came naturally. So I hadn't been trained to be a playgroup leader. A friend stimulated me to apply for the position. I was already married and had a two year old daughter when I applied, but I thought: nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Within a few years, after taking a link course, Sukran obtained the MBO (professional education) Social Cultural Work diploma. For quite some time now she has been working in the Rotterdam neighbourhood of Spangen: first as a Samenspel playgroup leader, then as playgroup leader and now as coordinator of all playgroups in Spangen. "To stay up to date on all the developments within playgroup work, among other things I visit the Samenspel Op Maat ambassador's meetings. There I can use the documentation centre to read the various specialist journals and I can exchange information and ideas with leaders and mothers. Each Samenspel playgroup does things differently and so we learn from each other."

Ambassadors

The Samenspel Op Maat ambassador's club was established in October 1997: a practice-oriented Rotterdam network of enthusiastic and motivated Samenspel playgroup leaders and mothers. Now there are seventy ambassadors. The ambassador's club is an informal practice-oriented network that, through exchange of practical experiences, aims to enhance knowledge and expertise in the field of working in a group with parents and children. National dissemination of the Samenspel programme is stimulated further by informing third parties in the form of lectures, guest lessons and workshops.

The ambassadors have their own meeting room, 'the Embassy', in the offices of Samenspel Op Maat. In it they have a documentation centre, a corner for specialist journals, a video recorder and a computer. A number of times a year theme meetings are held there on relevant topics, and guests are invited to talk about their outlook and ways of working. Guests from the Netherlands and abroad are received there and are given information about the actual work of the ambassadors, who subsequently take the guests to their Samenspel playgroups to show them the practical side. Ambassadors are kept up to date on developments within the club through the 'Diplomatic Mail' that they receive every three weeks.

Besides Rotterdam, Samenspel Op Maat would like to set up such practice-oriented networks in other cities too. It is, after all, leaders and mothers who are best able to make parents and policy makers enthusiastic about preschool education.

"Another reason why I have kept coming is because the staff of Samenspel Op Maat have always had a lot of confidence in me. They stimulated me to follow a course; they believed in my capacities. They gave me the kind of stimulation you normally get at home. In that sense they function as a sort of parent to me. I can drop by with the craziest questions, nothing is strange to them. I can be myself with Samenspel Op Maat and I really like that."

Sukran has fond memories of the days when she was Samenspel playgroup leader. "When you read a book to the children, at first the mothers would just watch. But when they saw how enthusiastically their children reacted to what had been read, they wanted to do it themselves the next time. The beauty of Samenspel is that it isn't pushy. Mothers feel safe; that's why they keep coming."

According to Sukran there are still many Turkish women who would like to develop themselves but don't dare say so out loud. "Some Turkish women are allowed so little and don't get out beyond visiting their Turkish neighbour. To my family I am a sort of example of how it can be done differently. My nieces often see me running from one place to another; then they say that later they would like a job like that too."

Since Samenspel's establishment, the 'learning from each other' aspect has had an important place in the organisation's goals.

'A group that glows with self-confidence'

Jan Peeters, Vormingscentrum voor Begeleiding van het Jonge Kind (VBJK - Resource and Training Centre for Childcare), Ghent, Belgium

"Repeatedly, representatives of VBJK go to Rotterdam and staff of Samenspel come to Ghent. When I heard the phrase 'ambassador' for the first time, I frowned for a moment. Wasn't it slightly exaggerated? Ambassadors represent countries; surely they don't represent groups of mothers.

During a visit to the organisation, it first became clear to me wherein the success of the 'ambassador's approach' lies. It is an original way to make the central role of playgroup leaders clear. Through the ambassador's club, amongst other things, their experience and expertise are deepened and applied purposefully. They are the motor behind the whole 'Samenspel movement'. The ambassadors bring forward ideas at conferences and meetings.

When the playgroup leaders visited Ghent in September 1999, I saw that it really works like that in practice too. It's a group that glows with self-confidence, that believes in its own expertise and is at the same time open to new ideas. Nobody needs to convince them of the value of their work. On the contrary: through their enthusiasm and expertise they make it clear to others that educational support works and is necessary. And the need for non-condescending educational support - as I would like to describe the methodology of Samenspel Op Maat - has never been as great as it is now!"

Samenspel: spider in the web

Jetta Klijnsma, Alderman for Welfare, Public Health and Emancipation in The Hague.

"Stimulating the development of young children and supporting parents in their educational tasks are priorities in the policy on 0-6 year olds. Within that, Samenspel has grown into a strong and stable pillar. At the moment there are 19 groups running in The Hague and growth, fortunately, hasn't stopped yet. *I see Samenspel as a spider in the web, between the three policy fields in my portfolio: Welfare, Public Health and Emancipation. Samenspel weaves them together, keeps an eye on them and picks up signals straight away. It looks small and fragile, but it is strong, flexible, persevering and always prepared to look further.*

Samenspel offers a unique opportunity to reach those children who run the risk of starting their 'life's career' with a disadvantage. Through Samenspel they are given the opportunity to discover their fields of interest and their talents, and to lay the basis for an unbroken line of development. Not only do the children flow through to playgroup and primary school with more confidence, mothers too find out what their own possibilities are. Many of them want to learn more, do more, develop themselves further. This benefits the entire family.

And I haven't even gone into the possibility of integrating the spider Samenspel into the larger web of related policy fields, such as education and quality of life, or of its role in the implementation of the Brede Buurtschool (Community School policy; schools offering after-school activities for pupils and parents). All in all, I am enthusiastic about Samenspel. It has turned out to be a useful instrument in countering disadvantage in children and their parents."

The Hague birthday

In The Hague, mothers and children can take part in Samenspel for a maximum of one year only, and for this group that year is nearly over. They are all sorry: they would like to go on much longer and go much more often. But they must make way for new mothers and children. At around one o'clock mothers and children start to trickle in. One mother has baked baras (a sort of bun) and another mother comes in with an enormous tray of bulghur. That's because today is a special day: one little girl is celebrating her third birthday. Leader of this Samenspel playgroup is Joukje Guyt. She also leads the playgroup 'Wildebras'. She explains: "That way mothers see a familiar face when their child goes on to playgroup." On average, half of the Samenspel mothers take that step. This multicultural group of about ten mothers with their children, also has a Moroccan leader - Fatin Faloun - and there's a Turkish group assistant, Naima El Aychi. Samenspel is held in the playgroup's space, which is part of a primary school.

"You don't come here as member of a culture, but as a mother", says Joke. "That's why we have specifically chosen for a mix of nationalities. It contributes towards integration. Dutch mothers lose their prejudices and make friends with mothers who wear head scarves." One of the mothers has become group assistant to another Samenspel group. "Through Samenspel you learn to make time for your child", says another mother. "When my older child comes home from school, he has many questions. I now understand better what he's dealing with." Another mother is pleased that she is learning to speak better Dutch. "Everything is named in Dutch; I learn a lot from that."

Rozda, who will turn three tomorrow, will be given a 'grown-up chair' today. Like a small queen, with shining eyes and a party hat on her head, she is awaiting whatever is to befall her. She is sung to in four languages, accompanied on musical instruments they have made themselves, and she can blow out three candles on the cardboard birthday cake. It is a familiar ritual, in which leaders, mothers and children participate to their heart's content. Rozda is given a gift, a back pack with colouring pencils in it, and she is allowed to hand out small bags of crisps. She enjoys all the attention, and no less does her mother.

The reason that mothers can only stay here for one year, is The Hague's policy to acquaint as many mothers as possible with Samenspel. "The disadvantage, of course, is that many mothers fall into a black hole after that year", says coordinator **Connie Buitenman**. "That's why we have entered into an exchange with 'Opstapje' (a home-oriented programme for mothers, who are given play tasks to carry out at home with their children), which is also held in the playgroup area. We see it as a sort of continuation, to avoid letting go of mothers altogether when their Samenspel year is up and their child is still too young for the regular playgroup."

During Samenspel's ten years of existence, many delegates from other organisations have visited Samenspel afternoons to gather ideas. Such 'practice' visits have inspired many to integrate Samenspel into their existing activities, or to start up a Samenspel group of their own.

Learning from each other

Ayse Çakir-Cizrelióglu, *playgroup leader from Delft*, went to Rotterdam and The Hague first, to find out how things went there. "What I discovered during my visits is that every group does it their own way. This is not so strange, really, because we are all different and we each have our own customs. That's why in Delft we have taken over some things but not others. There are two groups in Delft at the moment but new mothers apply every week. In a few months we may be able to extend to three groups."

Yadigar Unsal, *of the Dalila toy library in Amsterdam*: "In Rotterdam I saw that mothers engage with each other intensively. What I like in particular about Samenspel is the bilingualism. It is good for the linguistic development of the children that they can speak both Dutch and their mother tongue."

Cobi van Liere, *coordinator Centraal Orgaan Peuterspeelzalen Groningen (Central Playgroups Organ, Groningen)*: "What made the biggest impression during our visit to Samenspel, is the effects of the sharing of experiences among parents or carers themselves, and between parents and leaders. To us, this was an example how the phrase 'educational support' can be put into practice effectively. It appealed to us and inspired us to start up a play morning for parents and children in Groningen."

Loes van Brenkelen *of Buurtwerk Eindhoven (Community Work Eindhoven)*: "In Eindhoven parents were used to leaving the guidance of the children to the leaders, and chatting away to each other. In Rotterdam mothers prepare a communal creative activity with the leaders, and then carry that out together with the children. So, parents are made partially responsible for the preparation of a play activity and that increases their involvement. Parents also watched over the children during the movement game; a responsibility they took on naturally. Through our visit to Rotterdam we saw that we could do things differently, even though there were great differences between groups: in another Rotterdam group the parents were less pro-active."

> *We are given time off for the activities of the ambassador's club. Our organisation considers it to be extra training.*

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Samenspel Op Maat

10 years – A flashback to the future

Preschool period is important for development

How far a child gets in social life, still depends too much on his or her individual qualities, effort and perseverance. That's the opinion of parliamentarian **Nebahat Albayrak**, who has been member of the Lower House for the Dutch labour party since May 1998. Ms. Albayrak holds strong views about the role that parents can play in the education of their children. She grew up in a large family in the Rotterdam borough of Hoogvliet. After secondary school, she studied law at the University of Leiden and held various posts with the local authorities.

"Up to kindergarten I spoke Turkish at home. When I went to primary school, there were plenty of Dutch children with whom I spoke Dutch, but that's different now. In a 'black' school there are hardly any Dutch children and then it becomes very difficult to catch up with language skills. For most children the preschool period has a determining role in their further development. Various research results have shown that. Parents often haven't a clue about what their children are doing at school. They trust that the school will take care of it all."

According to Ms. Albayrak, Samenspel fills that 'information gap' by preparing parents for what will be expected of their children at primary school.
"Disadvantage starts with language. Most parents don't realise that. In Samenspel linguistic development starts at an early age; both in the mother tongue and in Dutch. Parents should be made aware of the fact that children need stimulation. A particular child may make it without but most children won't. *Samenspel uses play, so that children urge their parents to go there. That way the stimulation comes from two sides.*

My parents too, were never aware of the contribution they could make to my school results. They asked me if I'd done my homework, but that was all." Her father felt that an administrative career at the local bank was good enough. "I often went along to the bank to translate and at a certain point the manager asked my father whether I wanted to come to work there after finishing school. It didn't appeal to me at all.

My mother was my motivation to study. She can't read or write and therefore depends in many ways on my father: he reads the mail to her, does the administration, reads the road signs out loud.
My mother blamed her father for never allowing her to go to school. My father, on the other hand, never put any obstacles in my way. His attitude was more 'laissez-faire'. Even though he would have preferred me to start working at the bank at an early age to earn money, it was also okay when I didn't want to do that.

My older brother does things very differently from my parents. He goes to parents' evenings, asks his daughter how and what she is doing at school, and is genuinely interested in her life. I see things slowly changing. The ambitions of parents are growing. More and more mothers work outside the home. Because of that they come into contact with another world and they start to think about the future of their children. Samenspel Op Maat will stay necessary in the future too: many women come to the Netherlands because they marry men who live here.

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Many of these women live isolated lives and Samenspel gives them the opportunity to get in touch with other women."

Fathers in the background

Samenspel doesn't just target mothers; fathers too, are welcome at a Samenspel play afternoon. In daily practice, most fathers fulfil a 'detached' role in the education of their children. Malika and Fatiha's husbands don't really get involved in the education of their children. In fact, Malika doesn't want her husband to come with her to a Samenspel afternoon. "That's something of my own." Fatiha's husband punished the children from time to time and reads to them regularly in the evenings. "He doesn't go to parents' evenings; only when I am ill."

In the Samenspel Op Maat Nieuwsbrief (newsletter) of February 1998, a number of fathers talk about their roles in the education of their children. It varies from baby-sitting to consistently visiting parents' evenings. Nonetheless, most fathers stay invisible, in the background.

The best of both education styles

Within the framework of this brochure, twelve Moroccan fathers were invited by their wives to give their opinions and visions of education and Samenspel; only one of them accepted the invitation.

Saïd Iazgui has two sons: Hassan, who is four and a half, and Mohamed, who is two and a half. He came to the Netherlands in 1993, "visiting family, to see for myself what kind of country the Netherlands is". He met his wife in the Netherlands and decided to stay.

A golden investment tip

Ahmed Aboutaleb, director FORUM
(Institute for multicultural development)

"The 90s are characterised by unprecedented economic well being and soaring indexes on the European and American stock exchanges. Within all that, we are flooded by financial tips and investment advice. Nonetheless, I don't want to withhold a golden tip of my own. You see, there is only one really important option: invest in children.

Children are the capital of our future. I am in favour of a stimulation policy that enables local authorities to offer preschool activities to those that really need them. A child that starts primary school with a major disadvantage, has a much diminished chance of completing a good education. And without a good education, it is almost impossible to take part in the current high-tech society. At the moment, for instance, one in four Moroccans leaves secondary education without a diploma. 'He who has nothing, has nothing to give' is an old Moroccan saying. The Moroccan boy who today doesn't complete his education: what will he be able to offer his children in the future?

So the human capital of the future requires an in-depth investment in the here and now. Which is nothing new to any good investor with a long-term perspective."

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Now he works for the Rotterdam council as a land surveyor. His eldest son went to Samenspel and his youngest is going too. Saïd read an Arabic leaflet about Samenspel at the community centre and stimulated his wife to apply. "It is good for both mother and child to learn something in such a way. And it's important to me that the child is not far from the mother. At Samenspel my wife learns how best to play with the children, not so much how best to educate the children."

Saïd, too, can tell that his sons benefit from Samenspel. "The youngest one tells me what the other children do, which songs are sung, the new words that he knows, and that he has learned to ride a bike. At home I play with the children too, but in my own way like most fathers do: playing at horse riding and playing with cars." Saïd and his wife bring up their children bilingually, even though "a new language is being created here", according to Saïd. A sort of a mixture of Dutch, Arabic and Berber. It's a language that many young people will speak one day, among whom will probably be his own sons.

Saïd only talks to a few people about the topic of education. "Everyone has their own way of educating and thinks that their way is best. I can see positive points in the Dutch education method too. Like the direct approach: I try to teach my children that. But the Moroccan method also contains good points, such as having respect for older people and knocking before you enter a room. I use those too."

Saïd's eldest son is doing well at primary school; his wife has heard that playing is not a problem for Hassan. "That's because of Samenspel", says Saïd. "Some fathers are afraid of Dutch society and then at a certain point they see that their son is doing things at sixteen that they don't want. That's why it is important to me to be involved in the education and the school. I don't just ask my son 'What did you do at school', but I also ask 'How did you feel doing it?'. Moroccan children are not often asked such things."

According to Saïd, it can make a difference from which part of Morocco people come.
"In Morocco, society is developing too, especially in urban areas. Parents are told that it is important to give young children a lot of attention. In fact the Government even stimulates parents to take over the French way of educating children. But if you left Morocco 25 years ago you don't know that and it is very difficult to adapt your educational methods to current developments."

International practice exchange

Like its funder the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Samenspel Op Maat highly values exchange with the so-called target group countries.

Representatives from organisations in Turkey, Morocco and the Netherlands Antilles have all popped in on various Samenspel groups at one time or another. For the development of the Samenspel programme, it is important to know how the target groups deal with issues in the field of education support in their own countries, because developments there aren't at a standstill either. As an organisation, Samenspel Op Maat can learn from these developments, and sometimes apply what it has learned directly or indirectly to the Samenspel methodology. Most importantly, however, exchanges

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must not be one-sided: *they should lead to new impulses on both sides. In national and international exchanges, the principle continues to be to learn from one another.*

Space for their own ideas

"Samenspel involves mothers directly in the education of their children". That was the reason for **Angela Dekker** and **Shirley Luisa** of SIFMA (Sentro di Informashon i Formashon na bienestar di MuchA - Centre for Information and Formation for the Welfare of Children) to introduce the Samenspel methodology in the Netherlands Antilles. SIFMA is dedicated to guidance and the enhancement of skills through programmes and activities for educators and young children on the five islands of the Netherlands Antilles. Ms. Dekker: "At a certain point, a situation had developed where crèche leaders found mothers difficult to cope with. Leaders didn't like it when mothers who brought their child would make some critical remark. But in our view and that of Samenspel, the mother is the most important educator. We would like to restore something that is actually normal. Mother and child are the central focus; that is difficult for the leaders because they have been trained to deal with children and now they have to deal with grown-ups too."

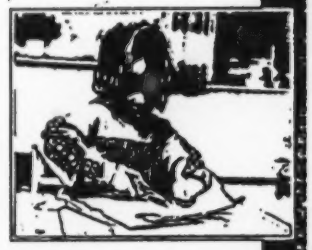
Another attractive aspect of Samenspel, according to Ms. Luisa, is that the play afternoons take place in the environment of a centre. This is important to SIFMA because it enables children to meet other children. "The only difficulty is that almost all the mothers work during the day. We will have to come up with very creative solutions to get mothers to a centre." That's why SIFMA is introducing the Samenspel methodology on the small island of St. Eustatius. The distances are relatively small there, so that mothers can play with their children for half an hour in the break. Distances are much greater on the other islands, and crèches are either close to home or close to work.

What appeals to Ms. Luisa about the Samenspel methodology is that there is space for flexibility, in contrast to other education support programmes that have to take place in a much more structured way. "Flexibility goes well with the Antillian mentality and gives leaders the space to incorporate their own ideas."

Through interchange, European organisations that were wondering how to reach families in situations of disadvantage, have been inspired to come up with new ideas by the Samenspel methodology. In 1999, in Northern Ireland and Germany (Essen), for instance, pilot projects were started based on the Samenspel methodology. This is because a solution is often much closer at hand than initially seems to be the case. For Samenspel Op Maat this is evidence of the usefulness of maintaining national and international contacts.

The expertise of parents is the principle

Barbara Parkinson, *Berlin:* "We were impressed by the confidence that Samenspel playgroup leaders have in the expertise of mothers when it comes to their children. At home and in the family's own cultural environment, the parents are the experts. They know everything about their child. Samenspel playgroup leaders never doubted the expertise of the parents. For the students the most important result of the visit to the Netherlands was learning to see parents and working with them in a new light."



"It is a good thing that leaders are never overlooked. The ambassador's club is proof of that. You can have your say, they are open to suggestions."

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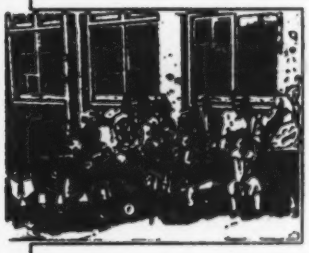

Simple but effective

Maura Mason, *Creggan Early Years Network (North Western Region of Northern Ireland)*
"I was impressed by the Samenspel programme and by the simple but very effective method that's used. I have seen quite a number of programmes for young children, but never one that manages to get parents and children so involved with each other and which so clearly shows the pleasure that both parent and child get out of this opportunity to spend time together. All those theories about the preschool period that I had read about, I saw them being carried out in practice in the Samenspel programme. Looking at the expressions on the faces of the children, and at their eagerness to learn from the things that the mothers said to them, you could, as it were, see how they were developing'.

Something beautiful

Nico van Oudenhoven, International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI)

"Samenspel Op Maat does meaningful, necessary and difficult work. The people who work for Samenspel are of a special calibre. As far as the future is concerned, it is clear to me that Samenspel will only become more sensitive and relevant. Because the roots of the organisation go down and out a long way, further growth is guaranteed. I won't go on about that, not because I don't want to, but because I will only be repeating what others have said.

There is another aspect of Samenspel that appeals to me strongly and that I hesitated for a moment to mention. Samenspel Op Maat does very beautiful work. There is an explicit element of beauty in their approach, in the parents and children who take part and shape the activities, and in the people who work there professionally. It is pure beauty when a young girl discovers that she can make sentences in a language that is strange to her; it is pure beauty when a group of 'marginalised' mothers start to feel that they sure do count too; it is pure beauty when a professional helper gratefully realises that he can really learn something from an 'uneducated' migrant father. All of this can be found in Samenspel in ample measure. Why this emphasis on beauty? The answer is simple. For a large group of people the world appears to be getting steadily harder, uglier and more grim. Samenspel Op Maat makes an effort for these people. Samenspel offers them the prospect of something beautiful, and through that of a life that is worth something for them too."

Looking back towards the future

Ten years of Sámenspel. People are coming to realise more and more that preschool education is essential to the development of children who, in their own environment, are not exposed sufficiently to so-called 'experiential learning'. Teachers in primary education can clearly tell if a child has been in a Samenspel or other playgroup: these children have a larger vocabulary, are more at ease among the other children, listen more closely to the teacher, are more independent and have good motor development. Over the past ten years, thousands of mothers and children have attended Samenspel play afternoons.

Each mother has her own background and viewpoint on the education of her children. But they all have one thing in common: they realise that preschool education would give their children's school career a better start.

The reason why parents chose in favour of Samenspel is simple: parents can have a say too. They are central and are involved in the stimulation of the development of their children. Samenspel is one of the programmes that is based on experiential learning, both for children and for parents.
For Samenspel Op Maat in the coming ten years, this will again be the principle. But it won't be the only one.
Here's a flashback to the far future.

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The 1000th Samenspel playgroup leader diploma

Rotterdam -- The parents of Karima Jama from Somalia were proud of their daughter when Minister of Education Fouzia Derouiche handed her the fervently longed for diploma making her a Samenspel playgroup leader. Five years ago Karima started the two year programme to become a Samenspel playgroup leader. "After that I decided to do the three year follow-up programme. It was pretty heavy to combine the housekeeping, a job and motherhood with study, but my whole family, including my partner, stimulated me to finish it", says Karima.
Omar Jama beams at his wife. "I think it's fantastic that she was appointed regional coordinator of the Samenspel groups in South Holland after obtaining her diploma.
We agreed that I will start working less, so that my wife can concentrate fully on her new job."
The unique thing about Samenspel is that parents and children visit a Samenspel afternoon together at least once a week.

According to Minister Derouiche, the local authorities soon understood the importance of preschool education that involves parents.
This, in particular, keeps parents actively involved in the education of their child.
In view of the growing demand from within preschool practice, in 2000 the decision was taken to establish a special Samenspel playgroup leader training programme. Experiential learning has an important place in this programme. Every year, many national, foreign and refugee women all over Europe follow the programme to become Samenspel playgroup leaders. It is now an officially recognised European education programme.
"An important side effect, in my view, is that children who attend Samenspel groups see that it is perfectly normal for people from their ethnic group to have a career. Perhaps it will stimulate them to do the same", says Derouiche.
"Samenspel has won a clear and structural place in the European educational system."

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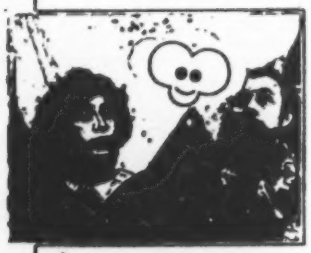

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Ten years of Samenspel: from small-scale project to national programme

1996 The need for information, support and training from within *Samenspel* leads to the publication of a (bilingual) *Samenspel* information brochure, and a video with English subtitles called '*Samenspel, playing together for better chances*'. The second phase is rounded off.
The implementation of the *Samenspel* programme in Rotterdam has been rounded off successfully. *Samenspel* is an integrated part of preschool and early school approaches in over 40 organisations in Rotterdam. But outside Rotterdam, too, there are more and more *Samenspel* playgroups.

1997 The start of the third phase of the project thanks to continued funding by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. In March 1997 the *Stichting Samenspel Op Maat* is established. With a small team of people who have built up their expertise in the preceding period, it focuses on national dissemination and implementation of the *Samenspel* programme, on supporting and training *Samenspel* playgroup leaders, and on national and international promotion of the *Samenspel* approach.
'Talking about borders' is published: a video portrait of three *Samenspel* women who talk about themselves and about the education of their children in two cultures.
The *Samenspel* ambassador's club is established as a way of enhancing the skills of the *Samenspel* playgroup leaders through mutual exchanges of knowledge and experience, as well as giving the further dissemination of *Samenspel* an extra push.

1998 The SamBa brochure, the story of three years of experience with *Samenspel* and primary school in Rotterdam, is presented during a swinging music festival for *Samenspel* mothers and children from The Hague, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. An increasing stream of visitors from the Netherlands and abroad is received by *Samenspel Op Maat* and pays practice visits to various *Samenspel* groups.
This leads to a growing demand for the support and training that *Samenspel Op Maat* offers in the implementation of *Samenspel* outside Rotterdam. Organisations in Derry (Northern Ireland) and Nordrhein-Westfalen (Germany) show signs of planning to import the *Samenspel* programme.

1999 To an increasing extent, *Samenspel* is becoming part of the municipal policy on eliminating educational disadvantage. *Samenspel Op Maat* starts discussions with the Albeda Regional Training Centre about the development of a special training programme for *Samenspel* playgroup leaders.

2000 Ten years after its official start, there are more than two hundred *Samenspel* groups in the Netherlands, which are attended by around four thousand mothers and children each year.

Samenspel Op Maat

10 years

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years of Samenspel

Samen~spel
Op Maat

This anniversary brochure has been published by the Stichting Samenspel Op Maat, within the framework of the tenth anniversary of Samenspel. The Stichting Samenspel Op Maat promotes group oriented work with young children and their parents, with a view to stimulating development and supporting education. The aim is both to counter disadvantage and to improve the development opportunities of families in vulnerable situations. In doing so, Samenspel Op Maat bases itself on the value of diversity in our multicultural society and on the expertise of both parents and playgroup leaders.

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Samenspel Op Maat

10 years
A flashback to the future

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